

# **COVID-19's Impact on Big Ten College Football Fan Experience**

*Honor's Research Thesis*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact COVID-19 is having on the fan experience during the 2020 Big Ten College Football Season. Specifically, this study analyzed how Big Ten College Football fan experiences differ during this season and how the changes to the season affected their viewing habits and consumption of Big Ten College Football. The following research questions will serve as a guide for the current study:

RQ1: How do fans participate in the college football season if attendance is not allowed or limited?

RQ2: What safety measures would fans want in order to feel comfortable participating in the college football season?

RQ3: What are fans' perceptions of Big Ten's decision to postpone the college football season, and how the Big Ten has handled the 2020 college football season?

RQ4: How does playoff implications impact fans' interest in the college football season?

As the focus of the study aligns with the postponement of Big Ten College Football, the researcher purposively recruited four participants who were currently enrolled in college and self-identify as a fan of a Big Ten college football team. Upon receiving informed consent, the researcher conducted four semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. These interviews took place over the phone with college students between the ages of 18-25 that consider themselves a fan of a Big Ten college football team. The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore fans' participation in this season, level of comfortability, perception of the postponement, and thoughts on playoff implications. All interviews were audio recorded, as long as permission was granted. Upon completion of data collection, the data were transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted to identify themes in the responses. The researchers developed codes to deduce meaning from the data and categorize the codes into broader themes to answer the research questions, with peer review and debriefing facilitated throughout the analytic process. In response to RQ1, participants spoke of the location where they viewed games (e.g., home, friend's house) and their feelings towards the college football season (e.g., discouraged, decreased participation). In response to RQ2, participants discussed safety protocols (e.g., social distancing, COVID screening and testing) and allowing fans into stadiums. In response to RQ3, participants talked about the Big Ten Conference's decision making, with mixed views about postponing the season, but overall support for prioritizing health and safety and allowing Ohio State to play in the Championship game. In response to RQ4, participants were all supportive of Ohio State playing in the College Football Playoffs and Championship game and indicated increased fan attachment due to post-season eligibility. These findings have implications for the Big Ten Conference, college athletic departments, and Fox Sports.

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## **Introduction**

### **Objectives**

The college football season is one of the highlights for college students and other fans of that university. College football brings an excitement to the start of the semester and football season, in general. Especially for Big Ten institutions, fans enjoy being able to attend football games, dressing up to support their team and university, and spending time interacting with friends and other fans. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, the Big Ten decided to postpone its college football season, which is now starting over a month later than its usual starting point (Bender, 2020).

Even though Big Ten College Football is set to return, the changing of the start date and the health guidelines put in effect to prevent the spread of COVID-19 will completely alter the viewing experience for fans and students. These changes include how fans will interact with other fans, how and where they can cheer on their team, their comfort level in participating in consuming college football, how they believe how well or poorly the situation was dealt with by the Big Ten, and their thoughts and interest level for the upcoming season. One specific example of how fans' experience will vary is how fans will not be allowed in the stadiums for Big Ten football games (Schumann, 2020).

This is all significant because fans' interest and participation is what allows the sports program to bring in money and be successful and popular around the country. The fans' interest and attachment level are also at risk, as fans typically have higher self-esteem when being able to connect and root on their favorite team (Phua, 2010.) Since this is the first time the college football season was considered being cancelled and is now postponed until October, with implications for the fan experience and program success, this is a necessary topic to dive deeper

in. Obtaining fans' perspectives will help illustrate their thoughts, excitement and/or concerns on the upcoming Big Ten college football season, which can inform sport management practitioners on how they can adjust and potentially improve the Big Ten College Football fan experience for fans given the adjustments that need to be made due to COVID-19.

The specific research questions include:

RQ1: How do fans participate in the college football season if attendance is not allowed or limited?

RQ2: What are fans comfortable with when participating in the college football season?

RQ3: What are fans' perceptions of how the Big Ten handled the 2020 college football season, as they ultimately decided to postpone the college football season?

RQ4: How does playoff eligibility impact fans' interest level to the college football season?

## **Literature Review**

### **Sport Consumption**

In terms of sports fans participating in college football, it is clear that college football brings joy and excitement to fans around the country. In some areas, especially for Big Ten institutions, such as The Ohio State University, Saturday gamedays have become religious and a tradition. Fans and students come together to interact and support their team. These traditions for Ohio State include the entire stadium being separated into four sections, where each section puts up a letter in "O-H-I-O" and singing Carmen Ohio with the team after each game. These traditions vary for each school, but other common ones include tailgating with friends and family before the game and specific chants that the fans take part in before, during and after the game. Another example of this is how the University of Iowa team and fans turn to a nearby Children's

Hospital and wave at the kids following the conclusion of the first quarter of every home game (Schroeder, 2017). Fans use these customs during game day in order to feel more connected to their respective team, which has a positive impact on their mood and self-esteem (Phua, 2010). These traditions have also proven to allow fans and the community to not only feel more attached to their favorite team, but also to enhance connections with friends and other fans (Eastman & Riggs, 1994).

It is currently unknown if fans will eventually be allowed back into stadiums for the Big Ten season once it resumes. However, for now no fans will be permitted to attend games, as only family members of the players will be able to enter (Emerson et al., 2020). This is important because a large part of the college football experience comes from fans watching their favorite team live, which creates a competitive and energetic atmosphere for the team and for the fans. Now, fans will be forced to watch at home or with other people on TV. If fans are eventually allowed back into the stadium as the season progresses, it will be interesting to see how many fans would be allowed in, along with how many fans would actually feel comfortable entering the stadium, given the severity of the circumstances. This is a vital issue to find out more about from the fans point of view since fans' interest is needed for college football's, more specifically the Big Ten's, return to be successful.

### **COVID-19 Impact on College Football**

It has now been announced that Big Ten football is returning October 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, which will set up an 8-game regular season, including a Big Ten championship game and 9<sup>th</sup> week for all teams to play against the other Big Ten division (Bender, 2020). This decision to originally cancel the season disappointed both fans of Big Ten teams and the teams themselves. The fans and Big Ten teams were excited once the Big Ten reversed this decision, but there are

still some upset that the season was postponed regardless (Birdsall, 2020). While not guaranteed that a Big Ten team will be eligible to make the College Football Playoffs, Big Ten teams will be eligible to qualify, as the Big Ten Championship is set prior to the selection date for the College Football Playoffs (Bender, 2020).

This is a huge win for the Big Ten conference and its fans, as it may have been difficult to have the same level of fan attachment if Big Ten teams were unable to be eligible for the College Football Playoffs. However, now that it is known that Big Ten teams have the chance to make the College Football Playoffs and have a chance to fight for a National Championship, there is a renewed level of excitement and purpose for this season in the eyes of the fans. This is especially true for the more successful teams in the conference, such as Ohio State, Wisconsin, Penn State, etc. This is because the stakes are higher and a chance to fight for the ultimate prize in College Football, which is a national championship.

One thing that is unknown is how the Big Ten's shorter season will impact the committee who determines which four teams make the College Football Playoffs. It is assumed Big Ten teams will have less margin of error than ACC, SEC or Big 12 teams, since Big Ten teams will be playing fewer games than the other conferences. However, a 9-0 record that would include being the Big Ten Champions should be more than enough to send a Big Ten team into the playoffs. This obviously won't and can't be determined until after the regular season is complete, but other conferences may be given the opportunity to play in the College Football Playoffs over a Big Ten team if both end the season with the same record and accomplishments.

While having a realistic chance to compete for the National Championship should have fans excited and ready for the season to start, we do not know if they still view this postponed season in the same light as they have previous seasons, since it is shortened and no fans will be



allowed to attend the games as of now. For example, how will fans view Ohio State playing Michigan not on Thanksgiving weekend, which is when it is played every season? This information is needed to help the sport industry because this is a new era in sports where COVID-19 significantly impacts the fan experience and the fans' participation in this upcoming College Football season. Therefore, by gathering information, sport industry professionals can help find ways to help enhance the fan experience for Big Ten College Football fans.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The researcher conducted a qualitative research study to further explore fans' perspectives on the recent Big Ten College Football season that was initially postponed. The purpose of the study was to determine fans' level of attachment and how fans planned to participate in the college football season since the season was postponed and with health guidelines in place due to COVID-19. Fan experience is crucial to the success of sports, especially college football, so this topic provided further insight on the level of investment fans have in a season, which included their plans to participate and potential concerns. The fans thoughts and views on the past college football season were collected through semi-structured interviews that were completed over Zoom or a phone call that was audio recorded.

### **Sample**

As the focus of the study aligns with the postponement of Big Ten College Football, the researchers purposively recruited four to six participants who were currently enrolled in college and self-identify as a fan of a Big Ten College Football team. The age range of the interview participants was between 18 – 25 years old.

### **Demographics**

Four participants were interviewed in the current study, with each participant asked four demographic questions (see Appendix D). The first demographic question asked about the participants' gender. Out of the four participants, three participants were males, and one participant was female. The second demographic question asked what Big Ten College Football Team(s) the participants were a fan of. Three of the participants stated that they were fans of The Ohio State University, and one participant was a fan of the University of Michigan. The third question asked about the participants' college majors. One participant is majoring in health sciences. Another participant is majoring in business. A third participant is majoring in integrative neuroscience. The fourth participant is majoring in human development and family science. The last demographic question asked about what year in college the participants were in. All four participants were seniors in college.

### **Instrument**

The qualitative instrument was a semi-structured interview guide that included questions on participants' previous and expected participation in College Football, perceptions on the season postponement, healthy, and safety guidelines, and playoff eligibility (see Appendix D). The questions included in the semi-structured-interview guide corresponded to the study's research questions and were related to fans' thoughts and predicted behaviors pertaining to the past Big Ten College Football season, along with how their participation this year differed from previous seasons. These interviews took place via Zoom or a phone call that was audio recorded and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview guide was reviewed by experts in qualitative research and revised based upon feedback received.

### **Study Procedures**

Any student aged 18-25 who was currently enrolled as a full-time college student and self-identifies as a fan of a Big Ten College Football team was eligible for this study.

Recruitment of study participants was done through email (see Appendix B). Before the interview took place, informed consent was obtained from the participants through a consent script via Qualtrics (see Appendix C). These copies of the consent were stored electronically. All interviews took place over Zoom or a phone call and were audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Only study staff members have access to the study files. The files were saved with the participants' pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness for this research includes being credible and dependable by conducting interviews with fans who are knowledgeable about Big Ten College Football. Credibility was enforced by recruiting college students who have an interest level in this subject and desire sharing their views on the postponed Big Ten College Football season. Dependability was articulated through description of the research design, rich description of the data, and consultation of research experts.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon the completion of data collection, the data were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted to identify themes in the responses. The researcher developed codes to deduce meaning from the data and categorized the codes into broader themes to answer the research questions with peer review and debriefing facilitated throughout the analytic process.

## **Results**

**RQ1: How do fans participate in college football if attendance is not allowed / limited?**

While discussing this question during the interviews, the participants mentioned how not being allowed to attend college football games was one of the many ways they had to adjust their lives due to COVID-19. Since they now weren't allowed to watch their favorite Big Ten College Football Team live in the stadiums, they were forced to coordinate other plans in order to find a new location to watch the games. The consensus among the participants was that it varied week to week; however, the options included watching at their own apartment with their roommates and going to a friend's apartment in a small group. For example, one participant shared, "Every Saturday, my roommates and I would still put on the Michigan game. Occasionally, we would go out to a few of our other friends' houses and watch at their houses" (Interview 2). This is clearly a drastic difference in viewing experiences when compared to Big Ten teams having full capacity stadiums that are filled up of passionate students that attend the school and other fans that decide to attend the games. This is one of the many adjustments people, specifically Big Ten college students, had to make due to COVID-19 preventing fans from attending the games.

For this research question, the participants also focused on their viewing preferences and how this impacted their feelings towards this college football season. There was a sentiment of being discouraged among the fans that attended the school that they rooted for. As one participant explained, "It definitely decreased the active participation, I would say, with the less active tailgating experience" (Interview 2). It is clear that fans desired to be more involved, which would include gathering in large groups prior to kick-off to get ready and excited about the game. This also includes attending the games and cheering for their favorite team in person next to friends and other fans in the stadium. On the other hand, for the participant that stated they didn't go to the same school as the team they rooted for, their preferred viewing preferences meant watching with friends and/or roommates. More specifically, they shared:

I'll hang out my friends. And then when the game starts, we all watch in my living room, because I make them watch with me. And then you know, during halftime, we hang out talk and then finish the game. And when it inevitably ends in a win, we all celebrate by getting dinner usually. (Interview 3)

This highlights the difference in viewing preference of college students that typically have easy access to attend the games (pre COVID-19) against those that don't. For those that can attend games each weekend, they were affected greatly, and this change in not being able to go to the stadium had a negative effect on their viewing experiences. For the fan that wasn't able to attend games each weekend anyway due to their geographic location, their focus was just to maintain their viewing habits of watching with their friends and/or roommates.

**RQ2: What safety measures would fans want to feel comfortable participating in college football?**

For this research question, participants stated their views on what safety measures and protocols they thought the Big Ten (and other college football conferences) should enforce to maintain safety for the players, coaches and fans. There were several safety protocols that were brought up. One of the main safety measures was to ensure social distance seating arrangements, so people who came in different groups would be able to be spread out from people that were with other small groups viewing the games. Participants acknowledged that other conferences were succeeding in creating the necessary social distancing among the fans in their stadiums. For example, one participant indicated, "I definitely need some sufficient social distancing measures. I do think that for the schools that have allowed in person attendance, the measures were probably adequate" (Interview 2). The other main safety protocol that was discussed was to have those who would attend the games be tested for COVID-19, along with filling out a COVID-19

questionnaire. This way universities would be ensured that not only do the fans attending the game not have COVID-19 - since they would need to test negative, but also they would be aware that these fans haven't been in recent contact with someone who was exposed via the questionnaire. Otherwise, they wouldn't be allowed to attend the game. This was illustrated by one participant who shared, "So, if you if you can feasibly COVID test everyone before they come into the stadium, then you really feel pretty confident. But I would say the minimum would be temperature checking, and a COVID questionnaire" (Interview 3).

One of the other main topics that was discussed for this research question was whether fans should or shouldn't be allowed to attend Big Ten College Football games. The participants were generally in favor of fans attending the games. This was especially true when discussing the college students that attend the university that they root for to be able to attend the football games. The participants all thought the capacity of the stadium should be 50% filled or less, as long as it isn't proven that fans attending games are super spreader events. One participant shared:

50% capacity or less. The stadium is so big I think like let students come because this is our school. I understand not feeling the same, but I think more than just families of the players into the stadium, I think that it's possible. (Interview 1)

### **RQ3: What are fans' perceptions of how the Big Ten has handled the college football season?**

For this research question, the participants discussed their views and perceptions on the Big Ten's decision making and handling of the situation regarding the 2020 college football season. This includes the Big Ten's decision to postpone the 2020 college football season, along with their decision to change the minimum number of games needed to play in the Big Ten

Championship Game, which helped Ohio State become eligible for the Big Ten Championship Game. The views were mixed among the participants regarding the Big Ten postponing the season. Some of the participants felt that the Big Ten's decision was made too early on, and they could've waited to make this decision or just not postpone the season at all. As one participant shared:

Yeah, so I never been a fan of making early decisions before all the facts are out. And like this has happened and other sports as well, like French soccer canceled before any other league. And then it was very obvious to everyone that they didn't have to and it like hurt them. I think the Big Ten likewise made a similar error. (Interview 3)

On the other hand, some participants thought the Big Ten's decision was the right one to protect the players from any of the potential impacts COVID-19 has on people. For example, one participant said:

Although it's lower risk for like long term health consequences like I've seen in the NBA like a lot of people who got COVID, still suffering from like, health complications from it. And they are playing like months after that these kids are anticipating professional career in football. So, I didn't really have a problem with [it] although I'm a huge fan, I didn't really have a problem with the postponement of the season just to ensure their safety and their ability to move forward with their career. (Interview 4)

Even though the views on the Big Ten postponing the College Football Season were mixed, all participants were glad the Big Ten prioritized the players' health and safety. All of the participants were in favor of Ohio State being able to play in the Big Ten Championship Game, as they earned their spot and were the clear best team in the conference. As indicated by one

participant, “The best team did come out of the Big Ten, and it reflects the best of the conference” (Interview 2).

**RQ4: How does playoff implications impact fans’ interest in college football?**

For this research question, the participants discussed their fan attachment. More specifically, participants discussed how their favorite college football team being eligible to make the College Football Playoffs impacts their fan attachment to the season. This issue is more unique to the 2020 college football season, since many teams played a different number of games, which usually isn’t the case during a typical season. Overall, the participants stated how having a chance to make the College Football Playoffs increased the fan attachment to their favorite team. As one participant shared, “It would just add an extra meaning because it was an end goal for the team” (Interview 1). Participants also discussed how it would be disappointing and frustrating if they weren’t given the opportunity to be eligible for the College Football Playoffs. For example, one participant said, “It would have made me mad; it definitely would have made me mad” (Interview 3). It is clear that being eligible to make the College Football Playoffs has a great impact on the fans, as their teams fight for a chance to compete for a National Championship.

The participants also discussed their thoughts on Ohio State making the College Football Playoffs despite playing less games than many of the other teams that were also in contention. All participants were in favor of the College Football Playoff Committee placing Ohio State in the College Football Playoffs, as the participants expressed how Ohio State earned the right to make the Playoffs. This was explained by one participant who indicated:

I think Ohio State guaranteed their spot by not losing. And had they lost, that would have been a really tough sell to get them in there. But because they didn't play like just three



fewer games, it's fair to assume we would have won three extra games and the body of work overall, is, you know, subjective. And when you look at it, they definitely deserve to be there. (Interview 3)

Along with expressing how Ohio State earned their spot, it is clear how important it was to some of the participants that were a fan of Ohio State that they did in fact make the playoffs. As one participant shared, “It's pretty important to me like we've definitely played less games, but I feel like we've more than qualified for it” (Interview 4). Even a participant who was not a fan of Ohio State, but instead a fan of Michigan, mentioned how Ohio State, “in this particular case, they might be the best team in college football” (Interview 2).

### **Implications**

There are several groups that would be able to utilize my research going forward in order to help them progress with the issues that COVID-19 has caused. The first group that would be able to use my research would be the Big Ten Conference. This is because this research focuses on fans of Big Ten College Football Teams, so they can use the results to find out how to meet the needs and interests of fans while also maintaining safety protocols to stop the spread of COVID-19. For starters, the Big Ten Conference can review the results in order to assess how they did in handling the 2020 college football season, and then adjust their approach for the current spring sports season. The Big Ten Conference would see that their fans were in favor of being able to attend the games. Now with more time passing and more information coming out about COVID-19, along with vaccines starting to become available, the Big Ten Conference should consider modifying their stance and allow fans to attend spring sports games. With that being said, it is still important for the Big Ten Conference to maintain COVID-19 safety

protocols if fans are potentially allowed to attend games. The Big Ten Conference should discuss among its member institutions what should or shouldn't be allowed at games, and could consider what fans of the Big Ten Conference from this study communicated they would feel comfortable with and what would entice them to attend the games. This would enable the Big Ten Conference to create an atmosphere that is fun for the fans while also maintaining safety and ensuring the fans feel comfortable, as opposed to worrying about COVID-19 spreading at these events and continuing attendance restrictions.

Another main takeaway that the Big Ten Conference should see from this research is the importance of coordinating with other athletic conferences. This directly applies to the Big Ten's decision to cancel this past 2020 college football season while other conferences decided to wait and see how COVID-19 would impact college football, which allowed them to start their season on time. While it is great that the Big Ten prioritized the health of the players, coaches and fans, it is clear that it was possible to start the season on time in a fairly safe manner. Going forward, athletic conferences should try to work together to stay on the same page, or at least similar pages, when dealing with these types of situations.

The second group that would be able to find this research useful is the college athletic departments. Similar to the Big Ten Conference finding out how to make their fans feel comfortable inside the stadiums, individual college athletic departments inside the Big Ten would also be able to determine how to accommodate their fans when they're allowed back inside the stadiums. In addition to considering the suggestions provided by the fans interviewed in this study, college athletic departments could conduct surveys to assess what would make the fans feel more safe and more comfortable while still being able to attend the games. These surveys would provide college athletic departments with even more information on the

perspectives of their fans. These surveys, along with the interviews conducted in my research, should give these college athletic departments a grasp of how to go about gameday with fans being allowed back inside the stadiums going forward. Also, these college athletic departments would be able to use this research in order to know what to prioritize, in terms of their safety measures. This study suggests college athletic departments ensure each fan has their temperature taken before entering the stadium, set up social distance seating arrangements where small groups would be spread out from other groups that are also attending the game, and maintain a limited capacity to ensure that fans will be spread out and not clustered on top of each other.

The third main group that will be able to use my research going forward is Fox Sports. Fox Sports should utilize this information because Fox Sports has a massive TV deal with the Big Ten Conference to broadcast their games (Young, 2020). From this research, Fox Sports will be able to further understand how they can work towards improving the fan experience going forward. This is important to Fox Sports because their success is based on fans' participation and the money they bring in as a result of fans' participation in Big Ten college football. Fox Sports will be able to determine what enhancements they can make to the viewing experience for the fans. One example is utilizing new camera angles to give fans a closer and clearer picture of the players and the game occurring to help make them feel like they are at the game. Another example of how Fox Sports can potentially improve their fan experience is by adding in-game entertainment for their virtual viewers. This will allow the fans that are watching at home to get more involved with the game, as Fox Sports does their best to replicate the stadium experience. These adjustments would not only benefit the fans and their viewing experience, but it would also help Fox Sports by enticing more fans to watch the games at home, which will allow Fox

Sports to increase their TV ratings and increase the money they bring in from these Big Ten college football games.

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## Appendix A - IRB Approval

11/19/2020

Study Number: 2020E1141

Study Title: Big Ten College Football Fan Experience

Principal investigator: Leeann Lower-Hoppe

Date of determination: 11/19/2020

Qualifying exempt category: #2a

Dear Leeann Lower-Hoppe,

The Office of Responsible Research Practices has determined the above referenced project exempt from IRB review.

### Administrative Note:

- As the university moves to a [staged approach](#) to restarting research activities, refer to [Human Subjects Guidance and FAQs](#). If after reviewing this information and working through your college you have additional questions, please direct emails to [research@osu.edu](mailto:research@osu.edu).

Please note the following about this determination:

- Retain a copy of this correspondence for your records.
- Only the Ohio State staff and students named on the application are approved as Ohio State investigators and/or key personnel for this study.
- Simple changes to personnel that do not require changes to materials can be submitted for review and approval through Buck-IRB.
- No other changes may be made to exempt research (e.g., to recruitment procedures, advertisements, instruments, protocol, etc.). If changes are needed, a new application for exemption must be submitted for review and approval prior to implementing the changes.
- Records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least 5 years after the study is closed. For more information, see university policies, [Institutional Data](#) and [Research Data](#).
- It is the responsibility of the investigators to promptly report events that may represent unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This determination is issued under The Ohio State University's OHRP Federalwide Assurance #00006378. Human research protection program policies, procedures, and guidance can be found on the [ORRP website](#).

Please feel free to contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices with any questions or concerns.

Michael Donovan  
[donovan.6@osu.edu](mailto:donovan.6@osu.edu)  
(614) 292-6950

## **Appendix B - Recruitment Email**

Subject Line: Attention- COVID-19 Impact on Big Ten College Football Fan Experience Study

Dear [insert name],

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my Honors Research study titled “COVID-19 Impact on Big Ten College Football Fan Experience.” You have been selected as a potential participant for this study due to the fact you meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) are currently a college student, and (b) is a fan of/or has personal interest in a Big Ten College Football team. If you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes that focuses on your previous and expected upcoming college football viewing and participation experiences. The interviews will take place over the phone or zoom. Prior to the interviews, participants will also be asked to complete a brief survey via Qualtrics. There are no direct benefits to you personally for participating, but the information obtained from this study can provide sport practitioners information on how they can adjust and potentially improve the Big Ten College Football fan experience for fans given the adjustments that need to be made due to COVID-19.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please email Dr. Leeann Lower-Hoppe at [lower-hoppe.1@osu.edu](mailto:lower-hoppe.1@osu.edu). For questions about the research study, please direct all inquiries to Dr. Lower-Hoppe. Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Brian Needle, Dr. Lower-Hoppe, and Ashley Ryder



## **Appendix C – Informed Consent Form**

### **The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research**

**Study Title:** COVID-19 Impact on Big Ten College Football Fan Experience

**Protocol Number:** 2020E1141

**Researcher:** Brian Needle, Leeann Lower-Hoppe, and Ashley Ryder

**This is a consent form for research participation.** It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

**Your participation is voluntary.** Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

**Purpose:** As a result of COVID-19, The Big Ten College Football Season was originally postponed which lead to new health and safety guidelines to try and stop the spread of COVID-19. Thus, the purposes of this study are to: (a) explore how college students will participate in the Big Ten College Football season, (b) explore how their current participation compares to previous seasons, and (c) explore the attachment levels from fans on a shortened and postponed season.

**Procedures/Tasks:** If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes in length each. Interviews will be conducted via telephone or zoom. During the interview, you may decline to answer any questions that may make you uncomfortable. All interviews will be recorded, if permission is granted, and they will be transcribed verbatim. Lastly, you will be asked to complete a short survey including demographic information. The information from the survey will only be presented in aggregate form.

**Duration:** You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:** There is a minimal risk of potential discomfort in answering personal questions. There are no direct benefits for your participation in the study, but the information obtained from this study can provide sport management programs information on how they can adjust and potentially improve the Big Ten College Football fan experience for fans given the adjustments that need to be made due to COVID-19.

#### **Confidentiality:**

We will work to make sure that no one sees your online responses without approval. But, because we are using the Internet, there is a chance that someone could access your online responses without permission. In some cases, this information could be used to identify you.

Also, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by

state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Appropriate measures and precautions will be taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants in this qualitative study. In order to take appropriate measures to protect participants confidentiality, we will ask you to verify your identity before recording the interview. A pseudonym will be used in exchange of your name on documents such as interview transcripts and if it is brought up during the interview once recording begins, and the name of any persons that are stated in the interview. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Demographic information will be only be published in aggregate form.

**Future Research:** Your de-identified information may be used or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

**Incentives:** You will not be paid for participating in the study.

**Participant Rights:**

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By agreeing to participate, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

This study has been determined Exempt from IRB review.

**Contacts and Questions:**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Leeann Lower-Hoppe (Co-Investigator), (614) 247-7909, Lower-Hoppe.1@osu.edu

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251 or [hsconcerns@osu.edu](mailto:hsconcerns@osu.edu).

**Providing consent**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this page and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I am not giving up any legal rights by agreeing to participate.

To print or save a copy of this page, select the print button on your web browser.

**Please click the button below to proceed and participate in this study. If you do not wish to participate, please close out your browser window.**

## **Appendix D – Interview Guide**

### *Preliminary Information*

- Discuss consent script with interviewee.
- Explain that appropriate measures and precautions will be taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.
- Ask permission to record.
- Thank interviewee both at the beginning and end of the interview.

### *Interview Guide Questions:*

#### **RQ1: How do fans participate in the college football season if attendance is not allowed or limited?**

1. If you are not permitted near Ohio Stadium, what activities might you participate in on game day?
2. If you are permitted near the Ohio Stadium, what activities might you participate in on game day?
3. If you are permitted inside the Ohio Stadium, what activities might you participate in on game day?
4. How will this potential difference in your participation in the college football season impact your enjoyment and level of interest this upcoming season?

#### **RQ2: What safety measures would fans want in order to feel comfortable participating in the college football season?**

5. Given the circumstances surrounding this season, how would you choose to participate in the college football season?
6. What are some specific examples of how your participation level/activities will differ this season?
  - Probe: Tell me about possible components you might add or that could be removed from your typical college football gameday experience
7. What are your thoughts on fans being allowed inside the stadium this season? Please explain.
8. If fans are allowed in the stadium, what would be your ideal number or percentage of fans permitted to attend? Please explain.
9. Is there a certain number or percentage of fans that would deter you from attending? Please explain.

10. Tell me about some examples of safety measures and precautions you would want the Big Ten teams to implement both inside and around the stadiums.

**RQ3: What are fans' perceptions of how the Big Ten handled the 2020 college football season, as they ultimately decided to postpone the college football season?**

11. What were your thoughts on the actions of the Big Ten in postponing the 2020 college football season?
- Probe: Agree or disagree? Please explain.
12. Tell me what would you have done differently, or have liked the Big Ten to have done differently.
13. There are currently other conferences that are allowing fans into the stadiums, how do you view the Big Ten's decision to currently not allow fans into the stadiums?
14. Reflecting back, tell me if there was a point this past off-season where you thought college football wasn't coming back at all this season? Please explain.
- How did that impact your interest or attachment to college football?
15. Is there anything in particular about the Big Ten's decision-making process that stood out to you, either as a positive that you agreed with, or a negative that you disagreed with? Please explain.

**RQ4: How does playoff eligibility impact fans' interest level to the college football season?**

16. Do you think the Big Ten Conference should be eligible for the College Football Playoffs? Please explain.
17. How important is it to you that your favorite team Big Ten team can qualify for the College Football Playoffs?
18. What would your interest or attachment to your favorite Big Ten team be if they couldn't qualify for the college football playoffs but just be eligible for the Rose Bowl against a Pac-12 team? Please explain.
19. What would your interest or attachment to your favorite Big Ten team be if they could qualify for the college football playoffs? Please explain.
20. How does the unknown of the Big Ten eligibility for the college football playoffs impact your entire college football watching experience this season?
- Probe: How does this influence your watching habits?

**Demographics**

1. What is your gender?
2. What Big Ten College Football Team(s) are you a fan of?
3. What is your major in college?
4. What year of college are you in?